

Fibbing on Anzac Day

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April 25, 2022 was one of the less edifying days in the annals of commemorating the fallen. The day is regarded as special for Australians and New Zealanders for being a solemn occasion, a moment to consider those who gave their lives up for King (or Queen) and country. In recent decades, militarists and organisers of the occasion have found greater merit in focusing on that nebulous notion of “mateship” – friendship and collective spirit under fire. This serves as a suitable distraction from those malignant ignoramuses who put them there in the first place. Barely credible and competent commanders and politicians can be exempt from scrutiny so that the diggers can commune in memories of lost friends and valour.

But this day was a bit different. There was an election to fight, and Australia’s Prime Minister, **Scott Morrison**, was going to make the most of the occasion. There were fibs to be told, myths to hail. This was no occasion to talk about interest rates, rubbish and roads. There were veterans, families, and school children to convince or inculcate. The message: go home, those who cherish peace, and prepare for war. There were those who came before; there are more to come.

Yet again, it was a day for Morrison [to use a naff analysis](#) of the global political situation. “An arc of autocracy is challenging the rules-based order our grandparents had secured, and democratic freedoms.” An odd statement to make on a day born from a failed invasion of a sovereign entity, itself cooked up as part of a military gamble by the fiendishly adventurous Winston Churchill.

The dawn service in Darwin [heard from](#) the prime minister about another country suffering. “The world has been reminded in recent weeks that the strength and defence of any nation starts with the citizens themselves.” This reference was not to Tigray or Yemen. There was only one war that exercised the Australian leader, one so clear and devoid of historical complexity as to be digestible even to him. Ukraine, to put it simply, had produced the right sort of refugees – the fair-blue eyed sort – and the right sort of moral baggage to promote

during an election campaign.

Then, a statement of the obvious, dressed up as a warning: the defence of a country depended on “the willingness of a people to give all”. “The defence of Australia depends on us.” Not untrue, but hardly explains the fact that the Commonwealth has only ever genuinely needed to defend its own shores once during its short history. Other conflicts have seen Australian soldiers as disposable pseudo-Gurkhas, mercenaries for empires, deployed without question and, it should be said, without wisdom, to conflict zones across the globe. Theirs not to reason why.

Morrison recalled some of these engagements – many defeats in the Gallipoli tradition. “From Gallipoli to Mosel, from the jungles of Vietnam to the sands of Afghanistan, from the skies above to the oceans below, what has compelled our soldiers, sailors, aviators, nurses and chaplains is the willingness to defend what they love.” Or at least what they were told to love.

In a manner condescending to the modestly learned and well-studied, the prime minister suggested that veterans of previous conflicts were not “naïve”, appreciating Australia as having a “liberal democratic” system. This came with freedom of speech, freedom of association, a free press and free elections. The remark is astonishing, as concepts such as free speech or freedom of association do not exist in Australia in any meaningful way – certainly not constitutionally or as a personal right. The only thing Australians can rely upon is a watered-down constraint on legislative power known as an [implied right](#) to communicate on political subjects. There is [no constitutional personal right](#) vested in a citizen against the government or executive.

As for a free press, Australian federal authorities have [raided the homes and offices of journalists](#), including that of the national broadcaster, the ABC, for publishing and writing about atrocities and violations of civil liberties. The Australian Federal Police even went so far as to advise the Commonwealth Department of Public Prosecution that it could prosecute ABC journalist Dan Oakes, an important figure behind the publication of the [Afghan Files](#). A reluctant CDPP decided against it, [citing](#) “a range of public interest factors, including the role of public interest journalism in Australia’s democracy”. Morrison’s idea of Australia as a political nirvana of freedom remains phantasm and fantasy.

Greater fibs then came from Australia’s Defence Minister, Peter Dutton, upon whom the muse of history, Clio, has never smiled sweetly. This was the occasion to push erroneous comparisons, the sort that any half-competent logician would have dispelled with sour contempt.

On Channel 9, [the Minister encouraged](#) peace lovers to prepare for war before searching the historical record for an anchor. “People like Hitler and others aren’t just a figment of our imagination or that they’re consigned to history,” he stated with implausible authority. “We have in President [Vladimir] Putin somebody at the moment who is willing to kill women and children. And that’s happening in the year 2022.” The Australian-backed Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is also doing the same thing in Yemen, but the House of Saud did not offer useful material.

With Hitler now in the comparative mix, Dutton could expand with comic effect. The People’s Republic of China, he suggested, could also be compared to Nazi Germany – at least in terms of the latter’s pre-Second World War guise. Both countries annexed territory,

and Germany did so ahead of its invasion of Poland in 1939.

Details were otherwise sketchy, the history student found wanting, but the moral of the tale was clear. "We have to stand up with countries to stare down any act of aggression to make sure that we can keep peace in our region and for our country." No "curling up into a ball", he advised. To do so would result in repeating "the mistakes of history." With Dutton and Morrison holding the reins of power, such mistakes are guaranteed.

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